

VZCZCXRO7005
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHLB #0196/01 0501619
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 191619Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4246
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3486
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3689
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000196

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/25/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MICHAEL WILLIAMS SAYS SYRIANS "COCKY"
ABOUT LEBANON

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams, UNSCOL Chief of Staff Jack Christofides, and UNSCOL Poloff Rami Shehadeh February 17 provided the Ambassador and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Staff Member Perry Cammack with a readout of Williams' February 12 trip to Damascus. Williams described the Syrians as "cocky" and extremely confident regarding their authority in Lebanon and their bargaining position in any future talks with the U.S. The Syrians argued UNSCOL had no role in resolving the situation of Palestinian military camps in Lebanon. For his part, Williams expressed concern about these military bases and also about Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. He worried that Syria, Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas would re-assert themselves in the camps following the Israeli punishment of Hamas in Gaza.

2. (C) Discussing UNIFIL and the LAF in southern Lebanon, Williams noted that it would be helpful to increase awareness that UNIFIL's role is solely to assist the LAF, not to conduct independent patrols. Williams also commented that some had agreed that the \$350 million spent annually on supporting the UNIFIL maritime fleet could be better spent securing Lebanon's land border with Syria. End summary.

SYRIANS "COCKY" ON LEBANON

3. (C) UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams February 17 briefed the Ambassador and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Staff Member Perry Cammack, accompanied by PolEconOff and PolMilOff, on Williams' recent trip to Damascus. UNSCOL Chief of Staff Jack Christofides and UNSCOL Poloff Rami Shehadeh also attended the February 17 meeting. During Williams' February 12 visit to Syria, he met with Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, Deputy Foreign Minister Faisel Mikdad, and Vice President Farouk al-Shara. (Note: Williams' February 12 trip was his third to Damascus. He last traveled in January to accompany UN SYG Ban Ki-Moon. End note.)

4. (C) Williams got the impression the Syrians would take additional steps on Lebanon-Syria diplomatic relations,

including assigning an ambassador in Beirut in the next two months, (i.e., not waiting until after the Lebanese parliamentary elections). Williams assessed the Syrians were waiting to use the absence of a Syrian ambassador in Beirut as a bargaining chip in their dialogue with Saudi Arabia. Explaining to Williams the delay in appointing an Ambassador, Muallem said that "some people in Lebanon criticize us," a reference to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt.

15. (C) On the joint Syria-Lebanon border committee, Muallem was dismissive, said Williams. He noted that the 1945 agreement stipulates that the Deputy Foreign Minister chairs the committee; he saw no need for Syria to appoint additional representatives. Muallem claimed the PFLP-GC camps inside Lebanon on the Lebanon-Syria border have "nothing to do with the UN." Muallem cited the 1969 Cairo Agreement -- which the Lebanese Parliament has since annulled -- to argue the border camps were an internal Lebanese matter. Additionally, Williams noted the GOL agreed in 2006 to disarm all Palestinians outside the twelve officially recognized Palestinian camps. (Note: The Palestinian military bases are not included in the twelve officially recognized refugee camps. End note.) When Williams raised the issue of weapons transiting Syria to Hizballah in Lebanon, Muallem flatly asserted that no smuggling occurred across the border.

16. (C) Describing the atmospherics of his meetings in Syria, Williams assessed the overall tone was more negative than during his visits to Damascus in November and January. Williams noted the Syrians were "quite cocky" on Lebanese issues. He assessed the Syrians were confident that they had

BEIRUT 00000196 002 OF 002

the upper hand in potential future discussions with the United States. The Syrians have "read the writing on the wall" and expect talks with the U.S. to occur, Williams said. The Syrians judge the "U.S. needs us more than we need them."

DEFMIN MURR WORRIED ABOUT CAMPS

17. (C) Williams also reported that Defense Minister Elias Murr had expressed concern about security in the Palestinian camps, in a meeting the day before. Williams said he shared Murr's concern and was more worried about Lebanon's camps now than he had been during the fighting in Gaza. Williams suggested that Syria, Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas -- realizing that Hamas had suffered a huge blow in Gaza -- may feel the need to score a victory for their side by fomenting something in the camps. An uprising in the camps would be a way for Syria to exert its authority in Lebanon. Murr, during his meeting with Williams, also noted the weapons that through the Palestinian border base (Qoussaya) could end up in the refugee camps.

"NO EYE" INTO BORDER BASES

18. (C) Williams asserted that the UN had "no eye" into Palestinian military bases in Lebanon. The Nameeh base near Beirut's airport is under Syrian control, Williams said. Residents in the bases number in the hundreds, UNSCOL assessed, but further details are a "black hole" for the UN.

UNIFIL AND LAF DOING WELL

19. (C) Williams provided Ambassador and Cammack with a general assessment of UNIFIL and LAF performance in southern Lebanon. Williams said both the Israeli and Lebanese sides had expressed satisfaction, along with their complaints, to UNIFIL. The Israelis want more patrols and less UNIFIL reliance on the LAF, Williams said. However, UN requests for more information from Israel, to help direct UNIFIL patrols to suspicious areas, has been refused. Israel argued that providing UNIFIL with data would be akin to handing the

information directly to Hizballah, which in Israel's opinion has infiltrated the LAF.

¶10. (C) For his part, Williams said an increased awareness of UNIFIL's role would be useful; UNIFIL's mandate is only to assist the LAF. The LAF has done "better and better," Williams noted. The LAF now is "more seasoned" and accustomed to their job duties. UNIFIL was pleased that the LAF bolstered its troop numbers in southern Lebanon during the Gaza fighting. Williams commented, though, that the LAF had Hizballah's blessing for its operations.

¶11. (C) Discussion turned to the UNIFIL maritime force on Lebanon's coast. Williams noted that some argued that the naval force's yearly budget -- \$350 million -- could be better spent on Lebanon's porous eastern land border with Syria. He assessed that the GOL needed a new border control policy to encourage foreign donors to support the mission, but opined that donors would, in fact, be interested in helping the Lebanese secure the border with Syria.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) We were struck by Williams' description of Syrian FM Muallem's dismissiveness about discussing the Palestinian military bases in Lebanon. We recommend that the continued presence of these bases in Lebanese territory be added to the agenda for any contacts with the SARG regarding Lebanon, including Congressional visits. We find Williams idea on the UNIFIL maritime patrol interesting and perhaps something worth pursuing in discussions prior to the next UNIFIL mandate renewal in the UNSC.

SISON